

Article

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Organization of Religious Behaviour in Different Christian Denominations in Poland

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Abstract: Any pandemic disorganizes the life of wider society. One of the manifestations of social activity is religious life. Despite progressing secularization, both religion, churches, and denominational associations have an impact on individual ethical choices and business decisions. This is true especially in Poland, where over 90 percent of the citizens declare affiliation with some religion, mostly Christian. The purpose of the present article is to demonstrate what activities are undertaken by churches in Poland at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and what differences there are in their organization of religious life. In order to achieve the set goal, qualitative methods were implemented in the research. As part of the qualitative paradigm, in-depth individual interviews were used, involving individuals responsible for organizing religious life at the parish or congregation level. The interviewees were clergymen from the most important denominations, ranging from Catholic and Orthodox to broadly understood Protestant denominations. The paper contains a review of relevant literature. It presents the results and discussion of qualitative research, and it also indicates the research limitations. The study reveals that individual churches have limited (Catholic and Orthodox) or totally suspended (Protestants) their religious life in the actual community-based dimension. The decisions made by the clergymen, regardless of their personal views, resulted from the assumed ecclesiology and tradition. While changing the organization of religious life, the churches maintained contact with the believers in various ways, using modern technologies and access to public media in this regard. Although the churches are not changing their doctrinal positions, they declare different forms of cooperation.

Keywords: pandemic; COVID-19; Christianity

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has an extremely significant impact on the functioning of societies, as well as many sectors of economic life. It is very difficult to forecast the directions and depth of necessary changes during the development of the pandemic. This is due to the fact that different scenarios and the pace of development of COVID-19 are considered in different countries. Thus, public policies used in the fight against pandemics are also different in individual countries. Assessments of social, economic, and cultural effects of the pandemic must be multidimensional, and thus, subject to significant uncertainty (Ragheb 2020; Sułkowski 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic is developing very rapidly on a global scale. It is understandable that it has a very significant impact on the whole social life, including religious life. Religious practices, which have, by their very nature, a community dimension in almost all religions, in Christian

denominations as well, are also changing under the influence of the pandemic. The purpose of the article is to examine the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on religious behavior in different Christian denominations in Poland. Two research questions were posed regarding differences in the approach of different Christian denominations in Poland to the pandemic. The research methodology is based on in-depth interviews carried out with persons responsible for the lives of the most important communities, i.e., with the Catholic clergy, Evangelical pastors, and superiors of different Polish Christian denominations. The interviews were conducted at an early stage of the development of the pandemic in Poland when dozens of cases of coronavirus infection occurred. Nearly all Churches introduced strict restrictions that did not result from the decisions taken by state authorities.

2. Literature Review

The term ‘pandemic’ means a serious infectious disease that spreads rapidly between people and occurs at the same time not only in one country but around the world (Hawker 2005; Crowther 1998). As far as the factors that led to the pandemic outbreak are concerned, a new infectious viral lung disease began in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019. It is probably a disease associated with the coronavirus crossing the interspecies barrier. The pandemic is developing on a global scale. It has been quite successfully brought under control in Asian countries, such as China, South Korea, Singapore, Japan, but it is rapidly developing in Europe, the USA, and other parts of the world. The current outbreak of COVID-19 has similarities and differences to previous acute respiratory syndrome (SARS; 2002–2003) and MERS respiratory syndrome (2012–present). Most of the secondary SARS and MERS transmissions took place in hospital settings, while in the case of COVID-19, significant transmission occurs between close contacts (Wu and McGoogan 2020).

One of the fundamental methods of limiting the expansion of COVID-19 is social distancing. This means quarantine and a radical change in contacts between people, which goes towards virtualization and online contacts. It is important that religions in general, and Christian denominations in particular, are based on religious communities, which means that pandemics are a particular challenge for the identity and life of these communities.

In history, including the recent one, religious communities had to seek answers about the importance of pandemics and adapt their religious practices and behavior to those affected (Simonsen et al. 2018). In the fourteenth century, when the plague reigned in Europe, Pope Clement VI forbade the practice of self-flagellation and raised charges against Jews for spreading it. He argued that Jews died from the plague as well as Christians, and the pandemic also spreads to regions where they do not live (Poliakov 2003). There is also a literature on the attitude of the clergy during a different pandemic (Burns 2005; Volder 2010). In the first half of the 20th century, we were dealing with the influenza virus and encephalitis. In order to protect people against the spread of influenza in the United States, churches were closed at that time (Starr 2006; Gamble 2010). In the second half of the last century, we were dealing with the HIV virus, which develops into AIDS, i.e., the acquired immune deficiency syndrome. In the first decade of the 21st century, there was a swine flu pandemic (Barry 2004; Crosby 2010; Vilensky 2011; Honigsbaum 2020). By 2000, over 36 million people in the world had been infected with HIV, resulting in 22 million deaths. Sub-Saharan Africa was affected most. Many Christian churches then began working together to overcome the spread of the dangerous virus. However, there were difficulties between the Roman Catholic Church and other Churches, and the reason was a different approach to sex life, procreation, and pandemic prevention. Infection with human acquired immunodeficiency virus (HIV) most often occurs through blood, sexual contact, or vertically from mother to child during pregnancy or breastfeeding. The Catholic Church, also during the pandemic, postulates not to use contraception, such as condoms, which may significantly reduce the risk of HIV infection during sexual contact (Potter 1999; Padovano 2001; Nelson 2002; Bate 2003; Oduyoye 2004; Mantell et al. 2011; Pillay 2015).

The literature on the attitude of the Churches to the HIV pandemic focuses primarily on the cooperation between Churches and religions, and on the activities undertaken by individual Churches

to prevent the development of the pandemic. Namely, it presents how Churches and religious communities in various countries took actions to help people affected by HIV and indicates educational activities in this regard (Bouten 1996; Schmid 2002; Bate 2003; Pillay 2003; Marshall and Taylor 2006; Makahamadze and Sibanda 2008; Galvao et al. 2008; Mboya 2010; Murray et al. 2011; Murage 2011; Kagimu et al. 2011; Ndlovu 2013; Bello 2015; Iyakaremye 2015; Kageema and Mathai 2018; Mathai et al. 2018; Mpoufu 2015). In some texts, attempts were made to indicate a religious and ethical explanation for the appearance of the phenomenon itself (Phiri 2004; Ramirez-Johnson and Hernandez 2005).

3. Materials and Methods

The article undertakes research on how Churches cope with the COVID-19 virus, which leads to coronavirus disease. The research used qualitative methods (Fendt and Sachs 2007; Sułkowski 2009). They allow for a better understanding of differences in the approach to the pandemic in various Christian denominations in Poland. As part of the qualitative method, in-depth, individual interviews were used. Its main goal was to identify ways in which representatives of various Churches and Christian communities take action against the coronavirus pandemic. The research tried to explain how far the Churches are able to verify their current practices and even beliefs relevant to their identity. It also tried to determine whether they were ready to work with other Christians to overcome the pandemic and how they explained the appearance and effects of the coronavirus. Interviews conducted focused on the following two research questions:

1. What are the actions that different Churches from Christian denominations take against the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the differences between the actions of different Churches from Christian denominations towards the COVID-19 pandemic?

The sample is purposeful and includes twelve heterogeneous individuals. They are deliberately selected clergymen and superiors coming from the most important Christian denominations in Poland. The qualitative research methodology allows for a reflective and critical approach resulting from in-depth insight. However, this is done at the expense of generalization, as formulating general conclusions cannot be done because of the size of the sample. Further research on issues related to the impact of the pandemic on the organization of religious life in individual Christian denominations should include statistically representative methods. Some statements of respondents may be characterized by personal engagement. Individual interviews were conducted between 13 March and 24 March 2020 with twelve representatives of Christian Churches operating in Poland. The date of the interviews is fully justified. They began two days after the World Health Organization announced a pandemic of the contagious COVID 19 disease caused by the SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus on 11 March 2020. On 13 March 2020, the Minister of Health's ordinance on the announcement of the epidemic emergency on the territory of the Republic of Poland was issued in Poland. This document banned gatherings whose number would exceed 50 people, including organizers and persons acting on their behalf. Churches that wanted to continue to organize religious ceremonies had to comply with this regulation. The study closes with the ordinance of the Minister of Health of 24 March 2020 amending the ordinance of 13 March regarding the announcement of the state of the epidemic in the Republic of Poland. According to the latest document, in the period 25 March to 11 April, only five people, except those who run the religious ceremony, may participate in this ceremony. Almost all Churches introduced even more drastic decisions, regardless of the regulations imposed by state authorities. They continued, despite some restrictions being eased at the end of April 2020.

The table below represents the respondents participating in the study (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents codes participating in the study.

Respondent's Code	Church Representative	Location	Number of Parishioners
C1	Priest of The Catholic Church	Suburban district of a city over 700,000	2500
C2	Priest of The Catholic Church	Town of 20,500	3000
EA1	Pastor of The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland	Town of 65,000	100
EA2	Pastor of The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland	Town of 14,000	75
ER 1	Pastor of The Evangelical Reformed Church in the Republic of Poland	Suburban district of a city over 100,000	97
ER 2	Pastor of The Evangelical Reformed Church in the Republic of Poland	Town of 6500	115
UM	Pastor of The Evangelical Methodist Church in the Republic of Poland	City over 700,000	54
SA1	Pastor of The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Republic of Poland	Town of 14,000	20
SA2	Pastor of The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Republic of Poland	City over 700,000	101
P	Pastor of The Pentecostal Church in Poland	City over 700,000	71
B	Pastor of the Baptist Union of Poland	City over 700,000	117
O	Priest of The Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church	City over 700,000	79

Source: Authors' own research.

The selection of respondents at this stage of the research made it possible to reach specific cases (Toften and Hammervoll 2010). In a pandemic situation, it gives the opportunity to understand the specifics of the functioning of the studied Churches. Individual in-depth interviews were based on a repetitive research scenario, which gave the opportunity to ask respondents additional questions, thanks to which it was possible to refine the research issues. Before conducting the research, the scenario was consulted with external experts dealing with issues of religious communities in Poland. Two experts came from the academic community, and three from different denominational church organizations. They were persons responsible for the legal status of their Churches and for their functioning and organization of religious life. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, on the phone, as well as by means of electronic correspondence. Both forms of oral expression were recorded and then, together with the material provided by email, they were transcribed and subjected to qualitative analysis.

The selection of respondents was intentional. Supervisors and representatives of religious communities, who are considered to be their proper representatives, took part in the study. Two of them came from the Catholic Church. The first stands at the head of the parish located in the suburbs of a city of over 700 thousand. The other one comes from a town exceeding 20,500 inhabitants. Representatives of several protestant churches also took part in the study. This term should be understood above all as Churches, which have their roots in the Reformation initiated in the first half of the 16th century. It is sometimes referred to as the First Reformation. Specifically, four respondents represent protestant Churches that have just been mentioned. Two of them come from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland, which is the oldest and largest Evangelical Church in Poland and belongs to the family of Churches called Lutheran (Barth 2003; Bayer 2008). The first of the respondents is a clergyman and head a parish located in an industrial city of 65,000 inhabitants, and the second from a smaller one, with a population of 14,000. The other two come from the

Evangelical Reformed Church in the Republic of Poland. They belong to the family of Calvinist Churches originating from the Swiss Reformation (Guthrie 1994; Benedetto and McKim 2010). The first of them is the pastor of a community located in an industrial city exceeding 700,000 inhabitants, and the other one in a rural community with almost 6000 inhabitants. Let us note that both Churches belong to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (Ignatowski et al. 2020). The study also included representatives of several Churches related to the Reformation, whose main foundations of ecclesiology and spirituality were formed as a result of the renewal of Protestantism between the 17th and 19th centuries (Mehl 2002). Thus, the first of the pastors belongs to the Evangelical Methodist Church in the Republic of Poland, which belongs to the world family of Methodist Churches (Yrigoyen and Warrick 2013). The participating priest works in a parish with a city of over 700,000 inhabitants. Further respondents belong to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Republic of Poland, which is part of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church (Schwarz and Greenleaf 2000). The first community is located in a city of 14,000, and the other one in a city exceeding 700,000. The pastor of the Pentecostal Church in Poland, the Baptist Union of Poland, as well as the clergyman of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church come from the same city exceeding 700,000 inhabitants. It should be noted that, when analyzing the statements received, the specificity of the given Churches and their ecclesiology should be taken into account. As the second Catholic clergyman rightly pointed out ‘the issue of the independence of decisions made within a given Church’s community depends on its hierarchical structure and adopted decision-making model. In this matter, communities differ radically—from a strict hierarchical relationship (the Catholic Church and the Autocephalous Orthodox Church) to complete freedom in the decision-making area of the undertaken problems (Protestant Churches to varying degrees)’ (C2).

4. Results

The study has confirmed that almost all Churches and communities were ready to undertake some modifications in their worship practice, while others suspended or drastically reduced their religious practices. The decisions made in this regard, as indicated above, depended on ecclesiology and the way the Church was managed. Thus, in the Catholic Church in the first phase of the pandemic, both respondents limited the possibility of gatherings with the participation of the faithful to 50 people, and in the next phase only to five, in accordance with the ordinance of the Minister of Health and decisions taken in this regard by their religious leaders. This does not change the fact that the respondents were in favor of introducing even more drastic decisions in this respect. The clergyman at the head of the suburban Catholic community said that services should be kept to a minimum or even suspended. He firmly admitted that services ‘should be minimized or completely eliminated during the pandemic’ (C1). The other Catholic was convinced that ‘suspension of religious ceremonies in the region and within a certain time frame is not only possible, but even necessary in some situations’ (C2). They both agreed that, in the name of protecting human life, ‘moving or canceling the hours of celebration seems to be a necessary condition in this respect.’ The Orthodox approached the phenomenon of the pandemic in a similar way. Their priest did not consider it appropriate to ‘limit services or suspend them.’ This is probably due to the fact that only a small number of the faithful gather at the services. Notwithstanding ministerial restrictions, there was, therefore, no need to inform the faithful of any restrictions. During the telephone conversation, the clergyman pointed out that ‘there is no need to issue specific ordinances in this regard since the faithful are members of society subject to legal regulations’ (O).

The research has confirmed that Churches of the Protestant tradition approached the pandemic more decisively. According to the respondents, their Churches suspended their open and community religious activities during the pandemic. The clergy of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, however, considered the possibility of still holding the services, provided that ‘one must strive for their drastic shortening and maximum dispersion of the faithful staying in church buildings’. At the end of the service, the faithful should be advised to ‘keep a distance of two meters and give

up the habit of shaking hands goodbye' when leaving. However, they gave up public services after telephone consultations with members of their own congregations. The first of the representatives of the Evangelical Reformed Church emphasized that 'not only services were canceled, but also religion lessons, Bible studies, and the General Assembly of the Congregation responsible for the organization of the entire community and its religious practices. The decision was taken unanimously by a five-member church college (representing the General Assembly), where the priest has the same rights as the other members' (ER1). Representatives of the Adventist Church and their faithful suspended their worship services, as long as the pandemic continues. The representative of the first congregation said that the decision was not difficult. 'Regardless of the pandemic in his congregation, all members are constantly encouraged to hold daily practice and prayers. Modern technologies that enable virtual meetings have been used in this respect for years' (SA1). The representative of the Pentecostal Church noted that, regardless of the pandemic, for many years, he had been asking that congregation members who are sick 'should not attend services. Constant telephone contact is maintained with them' (P). The Baptists did not immediately suspend their meetings. It was only the second decision of the Minister of Health that made them make such a decision. The priest said that 'with a sense of responsibility before God and out of concern for the community of our Baptist Church in Lodz, the Church Council made a difficult decision to suspend Sunday services' (B).

The study has obviously confirmed that the reason for suspension or drastic reduction of services is the pandemic. According to the first Catholic clergyman, restrictions in practice and a call to stay at home result from 'the love of neighbor, and thus confirm the credibility of the religious message.' The limitation is a consequence of human decency and fidelity to one's conscience, which 'commands us to do good and avoid evil' (C1). Clergy from the Augsburg and Evangelical Reformed Church came to similar conclusions. The statements are dominated by concern for human health and the need to stop the spread of coronavirus. The other clergyman of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, referring to the statements of Martin Luther, stated that in every situation, as well as in a pandemic situation, the order of love of neighbor should be given priority.' The actions taken are aimed at 'minimizing the spread of the virus, it is the implementation of love of neighbor and concern for their well-being' (EA2). The clergyman from the United Methodist Church emphasized briefly but firmly that it was about 'the health and safety of the faithful' (UM). The pastor from the Pentecostal Church said that 'much must be done to make the service a safe place for all gathered.' He added that coming to the service 'during the persecution of those in ancient times and those in modern times threatened and still threatens not only with health but also to loss of life' (P). For the first pastor of the Adventist Church, the reason is 'high aggressiveness of the virus and concern for human health and life' (SA).

The studies have shown that while leaders and community members are ready to limit the number of worshipers or even suspend services, they are not willing to change their position on important matters regarding the worship itself. The first of the Catholic priests pointed out that 'in the community of the Roman Catholic Church, which I represent, holy communion in Poland is generally distributed in one form—bread/wafer'. The other one stressed that 'church authorities strongly encourage that during the pandemic the form of giving communion is given to the hand of the faithful, not to the mouth.' Separation of communion under two forms is one of the most important and lasting elements of the celebration of the Lord's Supper by the Churches created after the Reformation. All representatives of these Churches recognized that there is no possibility of departing from the evangelical command, as is the case in the Catholic Church. The second clergyman from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession reminded that in 'the issue of the distribution of the Lord's Supper during the pandemic, one should follow the instructions of the church liturgical commission', which recommends that bread is served in the hand during distribution. He reminded that 'wine should not be drunk from one goblet but poured into small goblets'. The clergyman should be provided with disinfectants so that he 'can use them before distributing bread and wine.' It would be better, however, as the respondent pointed out, to 'give up the Lord's Supper in general' (EA2). Reformed clergy had no doubts in this

respect and argued that ‘any form of worship service should be suspended, and no other solutions sought’. A Methodist was very firm as well as the representatives of other Churches. He emphasized unequivocally: ‘There are no such circumstances—either under two forms, or the Divine Word Service without Communion’ (UM). The pastor from the Pentecostal Church pointed out that ‘he finds no reason to give up his own beliefs that follow from the Gospel precepts’ (P). For both Adventists, the pandemic state cannot affect ‘refraining from giving communion under two forms’ (SA1, SA2).

The study has shown that the pandemic should be read as a call for churches to take action and join existing initiatives to stop the spread of coronavirus. The second Catholic clergyman admitted that ‘defeatist positions and surrender to the course of events may occur.’ Namely, the pandemic ‘can be considered a punishment for sins’ (C2). The representative of the Pentecostal Church spoke in a similar way. He added that it could be understood as a certain ‘fate, and thus, devotion to the course of events’ (P). For the first Adventist, the pandemic is ‘an expression of the degradation of the world and the result of the sin of the first people.’ It is one of the ‘signs of the end of the world approaching’ (SA1). For the second, the pandemic is the result of human degradation of the Earth. It should, therefore, be understood as ‘a call to stop continuous degradation’ (SA2). For the Baptist, the ‘pandemic is a consequence of sin, but it is not a punishment for sins. It is a sign of the times that cannot be clearly read immediately’ (B). For the first clergyman in the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, the pandemic ‘turned everything upside down.’ The situation enforces non-standard behavior. Instead of ‘calling to come to church, people are called to stay at home.’ Instead of ‘rejoicing that more and more people come to services, one should rejoice when fewer people come’ (EA1). The second priest from this church confessed, as did the Catholic, that ‘there might be a temptation to see in the pandemic the punishment for sins or to read it as a punishment for sins.’ He definitely distanced himself from such interpretations, seeing a call to ‘be responsible for another person’ in the pandemic. As he stated vividly: ‘You should not rip a hero and lick trolley bars in supermarkets’ (EA2). For the second clergyman from the Evangelical Reformed Church, ‘the pandemic is a time of trial and a call to take care of their own spiritual life.’ He added that ‘as Christians, we must not give in to fear.’ In times like these, ‘taking care of your and your neighbor’s health and life becomes the same testimony of faith as even heroic persistence in the communal manifestation of the Word’ (ER2). For the Methodist, the pandemic is a time of special trial. ‘The need to move people away means that when the pandemic subsides, people will approach each other’ (UM). For the clergyman from the Autocephalous Orthodox Church, it is a call ‘for vigilance and responsibility throughout life. It is an appeal for earnest prayers for the cessation of the epidemic and the health of all the sick, as well as those who help them—doctors and all medical staff.’ It is also a sign that one should ‘take special care of the sick and the elderly’ (O).

The study has confirmed that the cancelation of services limits contact with the faithful but does not make communication with them disappear. All Churches, from Catholic and Orthodox to Churches after the Reformation, use modern technologies in this regard. They have the ability to broadcast their services on public television and on the radio. Regardless, they use social media, such as YouTube or Facebook. As the second clergyman from the Evangelical Reformed Church pointed out, ‘this is an easily accessible website that allows free placement, streaming, rating and commenting on films’ (ER2). The Methodist pointed out that ‘his parish had set up an official website devoted to coronavirus’ (UM). Anyway, all the clergy emphasized that sermons, catechetical materials, and services were regularly posted on the official websites of their parishes. According to the first pastor of the Adventist congregation, ‘all services have been moved to the Internet, even though the congregations are very small and only a few have more than fifty members.’ The faithful meet online. The decisions taken result from the fact that ‘the virus is aggressive, and human health and life are more important’ (SA1). The first priest from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession emphasized that ‘religious information, sermons, and religious meditations have been posted on Facebook’ for a long time (EA1).

The study has confirmed that churches, despite their differences, see the possibility of cooperation in the pandemic situation. This cooperation, according to the first clergyman of the Evangelical

Reformed Church, would be expressed by ‘jointly organizing Lent services, where doctrinal differences are not blurred. Of course, in virtual space’ (ER1). According to the second priest from the same church, cooperation should be expressed in ‘using tools to record and disseminate services, catechetical materials for children staying at home during the pandemic.’ He noted that ‘it is not good for technical equipment to be used by only one religious community during coronavirus’ (ER2). The second clergyman from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession recalled that local churches ‘organized a fundraiser for a respirator to maintain basic life functions among their faithful’ (EA2). Such a collaboration was also supported by the clergyman of the Pentecostal Church. According to him, ‘the formula for such cooperation should be open due to the dynamic nature of such a challenge as the current pandemic’ (P).

The research has confirmed that Churches could conduct educational activities on how to prevent the pandemic on their own and in mutual cooperation. The pastor from the Methodist Church said: ‘I think that the planning of various events that will be broadcast online can be agreed—in order not to duplicate the message’ (UM). The second Catholic clergyman stated that ‘in extreme situations, and these undoubtedly include the pandemic, the role of these communities can be invaluable’ (C2). Clergymen from such Churches as Evangelical Church of the-Augsburg Confession, Evangelical Reformed Church and Baptist Union noticed that in educational activity one should use the help of professionals. The Baptist indicated then ‘doctors, epidemiologists, employees of sanitary and epidemiological services’. The pastor from the Pentecostal Church pointed out that pandemics do not appear very often in Poland. Therefore, ‘no specific procedures have been developed in this respect.’ This does not change the fact, he concluded, that ‘education in this area is most appropriate’ (P). The other Adventist also pointed out that all education should be carried out by specialists. He added that ‘under normal circumstances, initiatives that are important for promoting health and a broadly understood healthy lifestyle (in the biblical sense)’ have been taken for many years by members of his church. However, this always happens outside the church building so that such activity does not arouse suspicion of the ‘ideological’ character (SA2). For the priest from the Orthodox Church, ‘the educational message should be included in the general catechetical message’ (O). The research has confirmed that during the coronavirus pandemic, pandemic prevention education should be conducted in Churches. It should, however, be carried out by lay specialists, not the clergy.

The study has also shown some differences in the approach to the coronavirus pandemic. Namely, some of the churches limited their services in accordance with state ordinances regarding the number of people who could stay together, as was the case with the Catholic and Orthodox Church. Others suspended their religious services, as was the case in the Churches after the Reformation. Decisions taken by clergy in both communities (Catholic and Orthodox) depend on the structure of the Churches, where the heads of both Churches are decisive in this respect. As the Orthodox priest noted in accordance with the decision of his superiors: ‘All services should be celebrated according to the Lenten schedule’ (O). In the case of post-Reformation churches, there is no firm order, nor is there any dependence on decisions taken by superiors. As the second pastor of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession said, the faithful were ‘only encouraged, recommended to participate in Sunday assemblies’ (EA2). It is worth adding that the same clergyman called back the interviewer after some time and pointed out that there is no obligation to celebrate in the congregation and every Sunday mass. ‘Pandemic decisions are taken collectively at congregation level’ (EA2). Of course, as the first Adventist noted, ‘with the obligation to observe state regulations’ (SA2).

The study has also shown a strong commitment of the communities to overcome the pandemic. The understanding of the role of the clergyman in this matter, however, is varied depending on the particular Church. The first Catholic clergyman stated that ‘state decisions should be observed in this regard’ (C1). The second one, regarding the limitation of the clergy’s role, asked: ‘What would be the role of other members of the community in such a situation? In a situation where social expectations would not find resonance in the attitudes of the clergy—both pastoral priests and hierarchs, who, because of their office, are perceived as spiritual leaders, could disregard state recommendations’ (C2).

The clergyman from the United Methodist Church pointed out that ‘he was to work together with the laity in the parish and thus strengthen the community, not his position’ (UM). The pastor from the Pentecostal Church pointed out that ‘in Protestant churches, where we refer to the universal priesthood, there is no special class of priests. The community expects him to be involved, just like any other member of the congregation.’ (P) The other representative of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession admitted that due to the dominance of the Catholic Church, its ‘role in the community is also somewhat exposed.’ In a pandemic situation, however, you have to rely on ‘laypeople who are better experts than himself’ (EA2). A slightly modified position in this regard was expressed by the second representative of the Evangelical Reformed Church. He emphasized that ‘he is one of the equal members of the church college in all matters, both ecclesiastical and secular.’ The pandemic, he emphasized, ‘did not change anything in this respect’ (ER2). According to the first Adventist in a pandemic situation and the clergy’s absence, which results from the practice in his community, ‘liturgical activities can be taken over by members of the community’ (SA1). The Baptist’s statement did not differ much in this respect and merely emphasized that ‘his duties should be taken over by another pastor or an appropriate member of the congregation’ (B).

The study has also shown that all communities used audiovisual means, but they did so in a differentiated way. The first of the clergy from the Evangelical Reformed Church stressed that ‘state media have made access to radio and television more available. However, the Catholic Church plays a dominant role in this regard’ (ER1). The first respondent from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession indicated that he feels a certain positive attitude from public media who want to interview him using modern technologies’ (EA1). Both Reformed and Augsburg Evangelicals indicated that they had been publishing their sermons and catechetical materials for many years. The second Evangelical-Augsburg clergyman stated that ‘his parishioners are accustomed to Facebook in this respect and are visiting parish websites less and less frequently’ (EA2). The first of the reformed Evangelicals sent the interviewer straight to YouTube, where ‘not only my last sermons’ (ER1) are posted. The other Adventist emphasized that his community is small, and usually, almost all members participate in the ceremonies. In the pandemic situation, ‘all meetings and services were moved to the Internet. The faithful meet online, which is a difficulty for the elderly’ (SA2). Catholic respondents showed some restraint in using social media. This is well expressed by the statement of the first respondent who stated that ‘in the era of multimedia civilization it is possible/advisable to replace the community of people physically gathered in one place for certain, in strictly defined circumstances, for a community created in cyberspace, aimed at replacing religious ritual in material meaning for spiritual experiences.’ However, he realizes that ‘the spiritual value of such a meeting will be reduced’ (C1). The other one pointed out that he had not used social media so far and that ‘the pandemic situation forces him to take action in this regard’ (C2). Both pointed out that thanks to television and radio broadcasts, they were not planning any activities in this regard at the local parish level. The priest from the Orthodox Church stated that he ‘did not use social media’ (O).

As pointed out above, the Churches advocated the possibility of cooperating in activities aimed at remedying the effects of the pandemic. This does not change the fact that some of them showed some restraint in this regard when it came to cooperation in education, as was the case with the first respondent from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Namely, there are some elderly people in his community who ‘can resist.’ He added, however, that ‘decisions are made in the congregation by voting and these decisions are binding all members of the Church’ (SA1). The representative of the Baptist Union expressed a similar position. As we indicated above, the respondent from the Methodist Church was in favor of coordinating activities. He noted, however, that is only going ‘to turn out whether such cooperation would be possible in a situation of limited mobility’ (UM).

5. Discussion

We can see that the Churches have restricted or suspended services. The decisions taken in this regard make them go against their traditions because gathering of the whole congregation at

joint services, if not every day, then at least on Sundays, is the essence of Christianity. Catholics and Orthodox do not close their church buildings but limit the number of the faithful to the rules given by state ordinances. Restriction, not closure, may be due to the fact that in both communities, there is a strong belief in the obligation to attend Sunday meetings. In point 2180 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we read that ‘On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass. The precept of participating in the Mass is satisfied by assistance at a Mass which is celebrated anywhere in a Catholic rite either on the holy day or on the evening of the preceding day.’ The Orthodox Church’s approach is similar, though a bit less rigid. In the catechism existing in Poland, just like in others published by autocephalous Orthodox Churches, we find the call to regular and continuous participation in liturgical practices that must be done constantly and consistently with conscious attention and discipline ([Living the Orthodox Christian Life 2009](#)). We will not find a similar strict position in the Protestant denominational books, where there are only incentives for joint Sunday celebration of services. In Martin Luther’s Large Catechism, one of the six religious books of the Augsburg Protestants, which contain essential teachings for them, we find encouragement to participate and advice not to neglect the services ([Stjerna 2016](#)). We will not find any remarks on this subject in the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the basic documents containing the doctrine of the Reformed Churches that grew up in the 16th century ([Ursinus 2018](#); [Bullinger 2011](#)). We do find it, however, in Chapter Twenty-two of the Second Helvetic Confession, in which we read: “Although it is permitted for all men to read the Holy Scriptures privately at home, and by instruction to edify one another in the true religion, in order that the Word of God may be properly preached to the people, and prayers and supplication publicly made, also that the sacraments may be rightly administered, and that collections may be made for the poor and to pay the cost of all the Church’s expenses, and in order to maintain social intercourse, it is most necessary that religious or Church gatherings be held. For it is certain that in the apostolic and primitive Church, there were such assemblies frequented by all the godly “([Bullinger 2011](#)). However, all this is limited to incentives to attend assemblies and not as a firm command.

The position of Churches that originated and arose after the Reformation does not differ from decisions taken in other European churches ([World Communion of Reformed Churches 2020](#); [The Methodist Church in Ireland 2020](#)). The chairman of the Methodist Church in Ireland stated: ‘It is with great sadness that we have suspended gatherings for worship in Methodist Churches across Ireland. We have made this difficult decision in light of the evolving government advice in both jurisdictions. Congregations are encouraged to seek creative ways to worship, even if not able to be in one place and to continue to serve those who are most vulnerable in their communities. We continue to pray for all affected by the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19), particularly for those who are ill and grieving the loss of loved ones, our front-line health care workers, leaders in government and the Health Services and for businesses at this time’ (Coronavirus (COVID-19) Update from the President of the Methodist Church). Presbyterians coming from the post-Reformation current closed their churches. In their statement, we read that ‘all Sunday gatherings for worship should also cease until further notice’ (Moderator of the General Assembly). The Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand, in a letter to his faithful, stated that Government directives are quite clear on this matter. We must close our physical church buildings and worship centers for the duration of the pandemic ([Henderson 2020](#)). Let us add that during the flu pandemic in the second decade of the twentieth century, churches, as well as cinemas and theatres, were closed. Decisions were made by the American administration because superiors did not always think that closing the temples was fully thought out ([Hatchett et al. 2006](#); [Starr 2006](#); [Gamble 2010](#)).

Although the studied church communities are able to limit and even close their buildings, they are not able to change positions on doctrinal issues. It should be remembered, however, that the distribution of communion in two forms belongs to the important elements of Protestant teaching in Reformation theology. Departing from it would be a denial of the evangelical message and getting rid of their identity ([Barth 2003](#); [Bayer 2008](#)).

Christian communities do not see the coronavirus as a punishment for sins, but rather as a call to stay at home, a sign of the times that cannot be clearly read and a call to help the sick and lonely. It must be acknowledged that the Churches refrained from looking for those guilty of the pandemic, as was the case in medieval Europe, where Jewish communities were accused of plague pandemic decimating Europe (Poliakov 2003; Prager and Telushkin 2003; Supple 2005; Slavicek 2008). They also do not see the pandemic as punishment for sins or human infidelity, although such attitudes could be encountered among the parishioners. Attitudes like these occurred towards people infected with HIV virus (Aikman 2007; Harris 2010). According to already quoted Phiri (2004), if the pandemic was to be seen as a punishment for committed sins, as was in the case of those affected by HIV, what should, in this regard, be the attitude towards people affected by the pandemic. This attitude meant that some doctors limited their help to infected people at the time. According to the same author, the pandemic shows that it is not just a medical problem, but it also forces to rethink the mission that modern Churches face. This reflection can only take place when theologians are with suffering people. It should be remembered that for one Adventist, the pandemic was read as one of the 'signs of the end of the world approaching'. In the same way, Adventists approached the understanding of the AIDS pandemic, which is 'regarded as one of the signs of the return of Jesus in the same way earthquakes, wars, droughts, floods, famines, and pestilences are viewed' (Makahamadze and Sibanda 2008, p. 306).

It should be noted that, for many years, there has been cooperation by some congregations in organizing joint services, while maintaining some restraint to not obscure doctrinal differences. It is much more difficult to take action in the social sphere and broadly understood education about the pandemic. In the pandemic situation, the dominant role of the Catholic Church is still recognized. The churches have failed to work out one single position on the subject of the pandemic, as was the case in the Republic of Ireland, where all the faithful were addressed together (Anderson et al. 2020).

It should be remembered that cooperation between religious communities in a pandemic situation has never been completely satisfactory. At world level, SODEPAX (Society, Development and Peace), a body that was created in 1968 to cooperate in social issues between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, is a good example. After twenty years of fruitful cooperation, divergences in the approach to the issue of birth led to the dissolution of a thriving body (Lossky et al. 2002; Oduyoye 2004). Regarding the coronavirus and how to overcome it, however, the Churches do not differ in their approach, and there are no different positions in this regard.

The role of the clergyman depends on the vision of the Church and the place of the clergyman in it. Where this role is greater, as in the case of Catholics and Orthodox, their importance is emphasized. It is smaller in the Churches of traditions derived from the Reformation (Thiessen 2009; Avis 2018).

6. Conclusions

Summing up, the research confirmed that the Churches studied are able to limit or suspend their religious services and encourage the faithful to stay at home. The positions taken by the churches in this respect do not differ from the standards adopted in many other countries. Despite this, they keep in touch with the faithful using modern technologies. However, they are not able to change or depart from their religious principles determining their identity. In the field of coronavirus pandemic education, they are ready for educational cooperation, limiting the role of religious superiors in favor of lay specialists. In their teaching, they are far from blaming anyone for the occurrence of the pandemic. They see a greater commitment to the sick and the elderly.

The conducted research allows presenting the views of clergy and community leaders on the approach to COVID 19. It allows presenting their views and expressing their position, sometimes different from the official one. The research helps understand the differences that exist in managing communities that depend on their superiors in various ways. They cannot, however, be considered representative of all Christian communities that have to deal with the pandemic. The research did not include a wider group of community members or persons belonging to them who deal with the pandemic on a daily basis, such as doctors and activists of social institutions related to parishes. Further

research will also show what the influence of the pandemic on the identity of the religions in general is, and the identity of churches in particular, which are not ready, as the research results indicate, to change their significant beliefs due to the pandemic (Jacelić 2016; Hedges 2010; Moyaert 2011; Hryniewicz 2007).

Regardless of the communities' different approaches to caring for their parishes, it must be acknowledged that the role of clergy and those responsible for spiritual life is still important. We can thus conclude that their opinions are a valuable contribution to the discussion about the pandemic itself and its importance to the life of religious communities.

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